

For the Lady's Book.

STUDY OF THE EARLY ENGLISH POETS.

BY PROFESSOR W. J. WALTER.

No. II.—SPENSER.

BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE.

- 1553. Spenser, born in East Smithfield, London.
- 1569. Enters Pembroke Hall, Cambridge.
- 1579. First publication—The Shepherd's Calendar.
- 1580. Appointed Secretary to Lord Grey, of Wilton, Lord Deputy to Ireland.
- 1590. FAIRY QUEEN, first three Books.
- 1592. Returns to London, and publishes several of his Minor Poems.
- 1595. His Amoretti or Sonnets.
- 1596. Fairy Queen, other three Books.
- 1597. Returns to Ireland, and narrowly escapes in the Rebellion of Tyrone.
- 1598. Returns to England, and
- 1599. Dies in an obscure inn, in King street, Westminster, and is buried in the Abbey.

THERE are few readers who are not, more or less, acquainted with The Fairy Queen. The prominent place which it holds in the school of English poetry, makes it a matter of conscience not to be wholly ignorant of this great masterpiece of the Elizabethan era—this "triumph," as it has been termed, "of the inventive faculty." But beyond this, the reading public know little or nothing of the great Spenser. His Minor Poems are not found appended to such editions of the Fairy Queen as are within the reach of the generality of readers, claiming a place only in such voluminous collections as those of Anderson, Chalmers, &c. They may consequently be looked upon as book rarities, and yet they abound in beauties with which it is unpardonable not to be acquainted. Miss Smith, the well-known translator of Job, has the following remark on this subject: "I once gave up Spenser in despair: I think some of his lesser poems even superior to the Fairy Queen." She instances the elegaic fancy, entitled "Astrophel," some of the Eclogues, and the Hymns in honour of Beauty. It is surprising that she should have passed in silence the Sonnets, by far the most vigorous and finished of all Spenser's compositions. They form one of the brightest gems in his poetic diadem, and it is chiefly with these that the page we here dedicate to Spenser will be adorned. Our poet followed immediately in the track of Wyatt and Surrey, the last of the bards of chivalry, and his pages breathe the same lofty spirit with which they were animated. Witness his sentiments upon the true beauty.

How vainly do poor idle wits invent
That beauty is nought else but mixture made
Of colours fair, and goodly temperament
Of pure complexions, that shall quickly fade,
And pass away, as doth the summer shade.

Have white and red in them such wondrous power,
That they can pierce the eye, and reach the heart?
Or can proportion of the outward part
Move such affection in the inward mind,
That it can rob the sense, or reason blind?

Why do not, then, the blossoms of the field,
Which are arrayed with much more orient hue,
And to the sense most dainty odours yield,
Work like impression in the gazer's view?

But ah! believe me, there is more than so,
That works such wonders in the minds of men,
I who so oft have prov'd, too well do know,
That beauty is not, as fond men misdeem,
An outward show of things that only seem.

For that same goodly hue of white and red,
With which the cheeks are sprinkled, shall decay,
And those sweet roseate leaves, so fairly spread
Upon the lip, shall fade and fall away
To that they were—e'en to corruptful clay;
That golden wire, those sparkling stars so bright,
Shall turn to dust, and lose their goodly light.

But that fair lamp, from whose celestial ray
That light proceeds which kindleth lovers' fire,
Shall never be extinguish'd nor decay:
But when the vital spirit shall expire,
And to her native planet shall retire:
For it is heavenly-born, and cannot die,
A part and parcel of the purest sky!

The same lofty reasoning is enforced throughout the sonnets. Love, with Spenser, is no dalliance of an idle hour, nor beauty a toy to be lightly won and lightly worn. In his view, they are things of serious import, objects on which he can meditate gravely and discourse philosophically.

Men call you fair, and you do credit it,
For that yourself ye daily such do see;
But the true fair, that is the gentle wit,
And virtuous mind, is much more prais'd by me.
For all the rest, however fair it be,
Shall turn to naught, and lose that glorious hue;
But this alone is permanent, and free
From the corruption that doth flesh *ensue* [follow];
That is true beauty; that doth argue you
To be divine, and born of heavenly seed,
Deriv'd from that bright source whence did all true
And perfect beauty from the first proceed;
The only fair, and what the fair hath made:—
All other fair, like flowers, untimely fade.

The sovereign beauty which I do admire,
Witness the world how worthy to be prais'd,
The light whereof hath kindled heavenly fire
In my frail spirit, by her from baseness rais'd;
And being now with her vast brightness *daz'd* [dazzled],
Base thing I can no more endure to view:
But, looking still on her, I stand amaz'd
At wondrous sight of so celestial hue!
So, when my tongue would speak her praises due,
It stopp'd is with the thought's astonishment;
And when my pen would write her titles true,
Is ravish'd with the fancy's wonderment:
Yet, in my heart, I then both speak and write
The wonder that my wit cannot indite.

Rudely thou wrongest my dear heart's desire,
In finding fault with her too portly pride!
The thing which I do most in her admire,
Is by the world unworthily espied:
For in those lofty looks is clear implied
Scorn of base things, and 'sdeign of foul dishonour,
Threat'ning rash eyes which gaze on her too wide,
That loosely they may not dare look upon her.
Such pride is praise, such portliness is honour;
That boldness innocence bears in her eyes:
And her fair countenance, like a goodly banner,
Spreads in defiance of all enemies.
Was never in this world aught worthy tried,
Without some spark of such self-pleasing pride.

Fresh Spring, the herald of Love's mighty king,
In whose coat-armour richly are display'd,
All sorts of flowers that on earth do spring,
In goodly colours gloriously array'd;
Go to my love, where she is careless laid
Yet in her winter-bower, not well awake;
Tell her the joyous time will not be staid,
Unless she do him by the forelock take.
Bid her, therefore, herself soon ready make
To wait on Love amid his beauteous crew;
Where every one that misseeth then her mate,
Shall be by him amerc'd with penance due.
Make haste, then sweetest love! while it is prime,
For none can call again the gone-past time.

Since I did leave the presence of my love,
Many long weary days have I outworn,
And many nights, that slowly seem'd to move
Their sad protract from evening until morn:
For when the day the heaven doth adorn,
I wish that night the joyless day would end;
And when the night hath us of light forlorn,
I wish that day would shortly reascend.
Thus I the time in expectation spend,
And fain my grief with changes to beguile,

That further seems his term still to extend,
And maketh every minute seem a mile.
So sorrow still doth seem too long to last,
But joyous hours do wing their flight too fast!

The famous warriors of the ancient world
Used trophies to erect in stately wise,
On which they would the records have enroll'd
Of their great deeds and valorous emprise.
What trophies, then, shall I most fit devise,
On which I may record the memory
Of my love's conquest, peerless beauty's prize,
Adorn'd with honour, love, and chastity?
Even this verse, vow'd to eternity,
Shall be thereof immortal monument,
And tell her praise to all posterity,
That made admire such world's rare wonderment,
The happy guerdon of my glorious spoil,
Gotten at last with labour and long toil.

The doubt which ye misdeem fair love is vain,
That fondly fear to lose your liberty,
When, losing one, two liberties ye gain,
And make him bound that bondage erst did fly.
Sweet are the bands the which true love doth tie,
Without constraint, or dread of any ill!
The gentle bird feels no captivity
Within her cage, but sings and feeds her fill.
When pride dare not approach, nor discord spill
The league 'twixt them, whom loyal love hath bound,
But simple truth and mutual good will
Seeks with sweet peace to salve each other's wound.
There Faith doth fearless dwell in brazen tower,
And spotless Pleasure builds her sacred bower!

One day I wrote her name upon the sand,
But came the waves and wash'd it all away;
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide and made my pains his prey.
"Vain man!" said she, "that fruitless dross essay
A mortal thing so to immortalize!
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And o'en my name shall be effac'd likewise."
"Not so," quoth I, "let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame;
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And on the heavens inscribe your glorious name,
Where when as Death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew."

The above sonnets have been so selected out of the eighty-eight, as to form something of a subject; and we think it will readily be allowed, that rarely has a tale of love been told with so much loftiness of thought, joined to so much tenderness and delicacy.

We must afford space for a specimen of Spenser's powers on a loftier theme. After moralizing on the folly

Of rearing trophies for devouring death,
With so great labour and long-lasting pain,
As if our days for ever should remain,

and describing Rome as a tyrant-mistress,

Who made all nations vassals of her pride,
And on the neck of all the world did ride,
Yet with her own weight now down-press'd she lies,
And by her heaps her hugeness testifies;

he has bequeathed us a noble pair of sonnets on the same subject, undeniable evidences of his great powers of conception, and of his command of language worthily to embody them.

O that I had the Thracian poet's harp,
To waken from the deep infernal shade
Those antique Cæsars, sleeping long in dark,
The which this ancient city whilcom made!

O that I had Amphion's instrument,
 To quicken with his vital note's accord
 The stony joints of these old walls now rent,
 By which th' Ausonian light might be restor'd:
 Or that, at least, I could with pencil fine
 Fashion the portrait of these palaces,
 By pattern of great Virgil's spirit divine:
 I could essay with that which in me is,
 To build with level of my lofty style
 That which no hands can ever more compile.

He that hath seen a huge oak dry and dead,
 Yet clad in reliques of some trophies old,
 Lifting to heaven her aged hoary head,
 Whose foot on ground hath left but feeble hold,
 And half disbowel'd, lies above the ground,
 Shewing her wrenthled roots and naked arms,
 And on her trunk all rotten and unsound,
 Only supports herself for meat of worms:
 And though she owe her fall to the first wind,
 Yet by the crowd devoutly is ador'd;
 While many young plants spring out of her rind.
 Who such an oak hath seen, let him record
 That such this city's honour was of yore,
 And 'mongst all cities flourish'd much more.

This sonnet leads us by a natural association to Spenser's Fable of the Oak and the Briar. There is a power of painting, and a picturesque vigour in the language of this piece, which stand alone and unapproached in that, or perhaps any age of English poetry. We must find room for it, to the exclusion of some more airy pieces, which we had marked for insertion.

FABLE OF THE OAK AND THE BRIAR.

There grew an aged tree on the green,
 A goodly Oak had it sometime been,
 With arms full strong, and largely display'd;
 But of their leaves they were disarray'd;
 The body big and mightily pight [*built*],
 Thoroughly rooted, and of wondrous height:
 Whilom had it been the king of the field,
 But now the gray moss marr'd his rind,
 His bar'd boughs were beaten with storms,
 His top was bald, and wasted with worms,
 His honour decay'd, his branches sere.

Hard by his side grew a bragging Briar.
 It was embellish'd with blossoms fair,
 And thereto age wanted to repair;
 The shepherd maidens to gather flowers,
 To point their garlands with his colours;
 And in his bushes small was used to shroud
 The nightingale so sweet, and thrush so loud,
 Which made this foolish Briar to wax so bold,
 That on a time he cast himself to scold,
 And snub the good Oak for that he was old.

"Why stand'st thou there, (quoth he), thou brutish block,
 Which nor for fruit nor shadow serves the flock,
 Behold how fresh my flowers are spread,
 Dyed both in lily-white and crimson-red,
 With leaves engrain'd in lusty green,
 Colours meet to cloath a maiden queen.
 Thy vast hugeness but cumpers the ground,
 And darks the beauty of my blossoms round;
 The mouldy moss which thee encloeyeth [*encircles*],
 My cinnamon smell too much annoyeth;
 Therefore I rede thee, soon from hence remove
 Lest thou the force of my displeasure prove."

So spake this saucy Briar with great disdain,
 But little him answer'd the Oak again,
 But yielded, with shame and grief ad-awed,
 That by a weed he was so over-craw'd [*crouched over*].

It chanced soon after, upon a day,
 The husbandman's self to come that way,

As custom was to view his ground
 And his trees of state to compass round;
 Him when the spiteful Briar espied,
 He causeless complain'd and loudly cried
 Unto his lord, stirring up stern strife:

"O sovereign liege! thou lord of my life,
 Pleaseth you weigh your suppliant's plaint,
 Caus'd by wrong, and cruel constraint,
 Which I, your poor vassal, daily endure,
 And but your goodness the same do cure,
 Am like, for desperate dole, to die
 Through felonous force of mine enemy."

Greatly aghast with this piteous plea,
 Him rested the good man on the lea,
 And bade the Briar in his plaint proceed,
 With painted words then 'gan this proud weed.
 (As mostly usen ambitious folk)
 His colour'd crime with craft to cloak.

"Ah! sovereign lord of us creatures all,
 Thou placer of plants, both humble and tall,
 Was I not planted by thine own hand,
 To be the primrose of all thy land,
 With flowering blossoms to furnish the prime,
 And scarlet berries in summer-time?
 How falls it then that this faded oak
 Whose body is sere, whose branches broke,
 Whose naked arms stretch unto the fire,
 Unto such tyranny doth aspire,
 Hindering with his shade my lovely light,
 And robbing me so of the sweet sun's light?
 So to beat with his boughs my tender side,
 That oft the blood springeth from wounds wide;
 Untimely my flowers are forc'd to fall,
 That are the honour of your coronal;
 And oft he lets his canker-worms alight
 Upon my branches, to work me spite;
 And oft his hoary locks he down doth cast,
 Whereby my flowrets' freshness is defac'd.
 For this, and many other such outrage
 I crave your kindly power to assuage,
 The rancorous vigour of his might,
 Nought ask I, only but to hold my right.
 Submitting me to your good sufferance,
 And praying to be guarded from grievance."

To this the Oak did cast him to reply
 Well as he could, but this his enemy
 Had kindled such coals of displeasure,
 That the good man could not stay his leisure,
 But home he haated with furious heat,
 Encreasing his wrath with many a threat.
 His harmful hatchet he hent in hand,
 (Alas, that it so ready should stand!)
 And to the field alone he speedeth,
 For little help to harm there needeth.
 Then to the root he bent his sturdy stroke,
 And made full many wounds in the vast Oak;
 The axe's edge did often turn again
 As half-unwilling to cut the grain,
 It seem'd the senseless iron did fear,
 Or to wrong holy eld it did forbear;
 For it has been an ancient tree,
 Sacred with many a mystery,
 And often cross'd by the priestly crew,
 And often hallow'd with holy-water dew;
 But such like fancies were foolery,
 For nought might they save him from decay,
 For fiercely the good man at him did lay;
 The block oft groan'd beneath his blow,
 And sigh'd for his near overthrow.
 At length the steel hath pierc'd his pith,
 And down to the ground he falls forthwith;
 His wondrous weight made the ground to quake,
 The earth shrunk under him, and seem'd to shake.
 There lieth the old Oak pitted by none!
 Now stands the Briar, like a lord, alone,

Puff'd up with pride and vain plausance,
But all this glee had no continuance;
For eftsnoons winter 'gan to approach,
And blustering Boreas did encroach,
And beat upon the solitary Briar,
For now no shelter was seen him near
Now 'gan he repent his pride too late,
All naked left, and all disconsolate
His stalks the biting frost had nipt them dead,
And watry moisture weigh'd down his head;
The heaped snow it burthen'd him so sore,
That now he can his head upraise no more,
But is down—deep trampled in the mire:
Such is the end of this ambitious Briar!

The following are happy instances of Spenser's poetic phraseology:

The tenor of my tale

No leasing [*lying*] new, nor grandame's fable stale,
But ancient truth, confirm'd by credence old.

There no disquiet cometh to annoy
The safety of our joy.

There doth soft Silence her night-watches keep,
And here in the still hour of rest doth sleep
Pour his limbs forth upon the pleasant plain.

However men may me despise and spight,
I feed on sweet contentment of my thought,
And please myself with mine own self-delight,
In contemplation of things heavenly wrought.
And loathing earth, I look to yonder sky,
And being driven hence, I thither fly.

Triumphal arches towering on high,
And lofty spires, *the neighbours of the sky.*

Fame with her golden wings aloft doth fly
Above the reach of envious decay,
And with brave plumes doth beat the azure sky,
Admir'd of base-born men from far away.

Spenser also abounds in powerful moral painting: the following are specimens of his talent this way.

Each sweet with sour is wisely temper'd still,
That maketh it be coveted the more;
On easy things, that may be had at will,
Most sorts of men do set but little store.

Whoso hath in the lap of soft delight
Been long time lull'd, and fed with pleasures sweet,
Fearless, or through his fault or fortune's spight,
To stumble into sorrow and regret;
If chance him fall into calamity,
Finds greater burthen of his misery.

What difference 'twixt man and beast is left
When the heavenly light of knowledge is put out,
And wisdom's noble ornaments are reft?
When wanders man in error and in doubt.
Unweeting of the dangers round about.
In this wide world in which the wretched stray,
It is the only comfort which they have;
It is their light, their loadstone, and their day:
But ignorance is like the grisly grave,
In which there never shineth cheeryng ray.

Nay, better learn of them that learned be,
And have drank deeply at the Muses' well:
The kindly dew drops from the higher trees,
And feeds the little plants that lowly dwell.

Is not the following image capable of national application?

I saw the bird that can the sun endure,
With feeble wings essay to mount on high,
By more and more he 'gan his wing t' assure,
Following the example of his mother nigh;
I saw him rise, and with a larger flight
To pierce the clouds, and with his mighty pinions
To measure the most haughty mountain's height,
Until he reach'd the Thunderer's own dominions.